

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church  
605 Madison St., Marshall, WI 53559  
Lent 2 + March 8, 2020 + John 3:1-18  
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To me, the story of Nicodemus is one of the most touching in the New Testament because it addresses the mysterious growth processes of faith. How is faith formed, and what must we do to keep it alive?

Nicodemus was a key member of the Sanhedrin, a highly learned group of teachers of the Jewish law. They served like a kind of Jewish Supreme Court to make sure the law was properly upheld. You can see how Jesus would be their nemesis. To them he was a lawbreaker, a troublemaker, stirring up the people and explaining his actions in terms none of them could understand.

But Nicodemus was different from his Jewish Supreme Court colleagues. He was curious. He'd heard about the miracles Jesus had performed, water turned into wine and so forth. These told him there was something more going on than just another wild prophet on the loose. The expectation of a Messiah was very strong at the time and many false prophets roamed the countryside trying to grab the public's attention.

Nicodemus can't risk being seen with Jesus in daylight. So late one evening, during his daily study time, he steals out under the cover of night to seek him out.

Nicodemus' questions seem clueless to those of us who already know who Jesus is.

But put yourself in his shoes, and you'll see they amount to an honest attempt to figure things out. And perhaps intentionally, Jesus isn't exactly forthright with his answers.

- N: Rabbi, you have performed miracles, so clearly you are a teacher with special abilities from God.
- J: You cannot know who I am or see God's kingdom unless you are born from above.
- N: But I've already been born! How can I be born a second time?
- J: None of you can enter the kingdom of God unless you are born of water and the Spirit. To know me, you and your people must all be born from above.
- N: How can these things be?
- J: The teaching of your people has been entrusted to you, and still you don't understand this? Stop thinking so literally; just believe. I have been telling all of you these things, and yet you still do not believe—that the Son of Man will be lifted up to give all people eternal life, just as the serpent was lifted up on a pole by Moses to keep the people alive when poisonous snakes swarmed around them. God sent his Son into the world so that everyone, all of you, might have eternal life.
- J: And furthermore, those who do not believe in the Son of God are condemned to live the darkness of death.

The original Greek is clear on which 'yous' are singular and which are plural. The plural "you alls" make clear that Jesus' concern is not only for Nicodemus and his personal salvation, but that all people come to believe in him as the Son of God. Now we have the context in which to hear the most famous line in all scripture: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Because God loves the world, salvation is for everyone who believes. This is why we repeat the same greeting at every worship service: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. No one is shut out, not even those who act as enemies of the cross – such as the Pharisees who were so threatened by Jesus that they hatched scheme that would result in Jesus’ death. Jesus is fully aware of what the Pharisees will do, and wants Nicodemus to grasp that he has come for all people, the scheming Pharisees included. In fact, the gift of grace and mercy through the cross, the forgiveness of sin, is *especially* for those enemies. And there are no qualifiers on this free gift of grace. No “Available only when the following conditions are met....” No exclusions: “Offer does not apply to rank and file murderers.” Salvation by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, is available to all.

But what about Nicodemus’ faith? Does he come to believe in Jesus as the Son of God? The last thing we hear him say in this encounter is, “How can these things be?” At the moment we don’t know the outcome. But if we look ahead to the end of Jesus’ earthly story in John’s Gospel, we find a clue. After Jesus is crucified, Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate for Jesus’ body so that he can receive a proper burial. And who appears with Joseph? Nicodemus, hauling with him a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes to anoint the body in the tomb.

From this we can surmise that Nicodemus *has* become a believer in Jesus, but probably a secret one, like Joseph of Arimathea. What would Nicodemus say if we were to ask him about his faith? Probably, “It’s complicated.” Faith isn’t something you either have or don’t have. It’s an active process, more of a verb than a noun.

Martin Luther said that this life is not about righteousness but *growth* in righteousness. This process of spiritual growth is actually fueled by doubt. I would question whether someone who is absolutely sure of everything in fact has genuine faith. Living out our faith requires a constant wrestling with doubt and re-adjusting of our parameters of belief. Haven’t we all said at various points in our life, “I used to believe that – now I believe this?”

The life of faith is one of asking better and better questions. Into the openness of our doubt the Holy Spirit can enter, filling our hearts and minds with new insights and understandings. As we walk with Jesus and experience the Son of God in our midst, let us have the courage to be wondering, with Nicodemus, “How can these things be?” Take your questions to God--and don’t be surprised when you suddenly bump up against an answer.

Amen.